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Soviet Viewed as Intent On Justification at Home

By HEDRICK W. SMITH

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 11 — The Soviet Union's refusal to accept blame for downing the Korean airliner has not only angered Administration officials but persuaded analysts here that the Kremlin cares more about justifying the actions of its armed forces to its own people and allies than about its credibility and image abroad.

From the standpoint of Soviet foreign policy, American specialists reason, shooting down an unarmed commercial plane and then saying it was on a spying mission makes little sense because it fuels confrontation with the West and undercuts the peace offensive of the Soviet leader, Yuri V. Andropov, especially in Western Europe.

Officials here regard the extraordinary news conference Friday of Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov, chief of the Soviet General Staff, as evidence Moscow has been stung by Western charges and is concerned it has so far come off poorly in the struggle for world opinion, but not enough to admit responsibility.

A week ago the Soviet press was implying that a Soviet fighter pilot had mistaken the Korean civilian Boeing 747 for an RC-135, an American military reconnaissance plane. But within 48 hours the Soviet line hardened and on Friday Marshal Ogarkov said the decision to shoot down the plane was "not an accident or an error."

'All Kinds of Insecurities'

Government specialists calculate that in the face of Western protests and reprisals, Mr. Andropov and other political leaders could not risk bowing to Western pressures, especially in this transitional period of a new leadership, when the political influence of the Soviet military establishment is greater than normal.

"An incident like this raises all kinds of insecurities in the Soviet leadership, both before the world audience and before the domestic audience, the domestic being more important," a Government official said.

"The most important thing to them is that the acts of the Soviet military appear to be legitimate and appropriate," this analyst added. "They don't want their own people to think they have done something unjustifiable, like wantonly shooting down an airliner."

Soon after the plane was downed, one fear in Washington was that Soviet political leaders might have ordered the action, as former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger put it, "to make a

point of ruthlessness" just before the scheduled meeting in Madrid of Secretary of State George P. Shultz and the Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei A. Gromyko.

Former Officials' Views

But after Marshal Ogarkov's news conference, the prevalent view here is that the order to shoot down the plane was given by a regional military commander under tough standing procedures for dealing with air intrusions, though American officials assume Soviet military headquarters in Moscow was told and could have intervened.

Former officials like Admiral Stansfield Turner, the Director of Central Intelligence under President Carter, and Adm. Bobby Inman, deputy C.I.A. director in the first two years of the Reagan Administration, said they believed the Soviet Union toughened its air defense procedures after another Korean airliner intruded 1,000 miles into Soviet airspace in 1978. That incident embarrassed the Kremlin, these officials said, causing increased aggressiveness among regional air defense commands.

American analysts also believe Mr. Andropov was out of Moscow at the time of the incident, on vacation in the northern Caucasus, and that Konstantin U. Chernenko, the second-ranking figure in the Soviet political hierarchy, may also have been away undergoing medical treatment. He has not been seen publicly for a few months.

The Soviet version of events prompted a question to Marshal Ogarkov about whether Soviet regional commanders "could start a war" with the United States. American officials said they doubted that regional commanders would have authority to launch offensive nuclear missiles.

Accidental Warfare Feared

But the Soviet failure to identify a civilian aircraft properly did add to worries here about the dangers of accidental warfare through misinterpretation of radar and electronic data.

Nonetheless the incident has caused no fundamental reappraisal of American policy, though it did disrupt the slight mending course in Soviet-American relations. Generally the White House feels confirmed in its view, as one official put it, that the Soviet system is "a brutal regime that relies on military force and intimidation," and must be met by American strength.

While the Administration intends to press its case against Moscow, experienced officials acknowledge it would be "out of character" for the Kremlin to admit a mistake and pay compensation. One hope here is that the propaganda setback may cause the Kremlin to be more careful in the future, though its public toughness leaves doubts on that score.

William E. Colby, a former Director of Central Intelligence, suggested Soviet political leaders may want to be more cautious in such cases.

Uncertain About Next Moves

Administration officials say they are uncertain how Mr. Andropov will now move. Officials noted that while he has backed the Soviet military he has kept his distance from the event, unlike former Prime Minister Nikita S. Khrushchev, who engaged in personal polemics after the American U-2 was downed over the Soviet Union in 1960.

Some officials said they believed a prolonged and acrimonious stalemate over the incident would prevent progress in other areas. But others speculated this dispute might persuade Mr. Andropov of the need for new gestures on arms control to try to recoup and rekindle West European opposition to deploying American missiles in Europe this fall.

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